

## Remarks at a Veterans Day Ceremony in Arlington, Virginia November 11, 2000

Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. And thank you, Secretary Goyer, for your many, many years of friendship and your service to our country. Thank you, Mr. Duggins, for the remarks you made today and your leadership of the Vietnam veterans. General Jackson, Superintendent Metzler, Chaplain Cooke. I think we ought to give a special applause to Lee Thornton for being with us all these years and all the work he's done. [Applause] Thank you so much. Thank you. What a faithful friend to America's veterans you have been.

I thank our Defense Secretary, Bill Cohen, and his wife, Janet, for being here. And Secretary Slater, General McCaffrey, the service Secretaries, other members of the Cabinet and the administration, and former Cabinet members who are here, General Myers and other members of the Joint Chiefs. To the Medal of Honor recipients, the leaders of our veterans organizations who have been introduced and who do such a fine job. To the veterans and family members, members of the Armed Services, my fellow Americans.

I welcome you all to this sacred place as we again pay tribute to the men and women who have stood at the barricades so that we may enjoy the blessings of liberty. Here we are, surrounded by the white markers that measure the last full measure of their devotion.

Many veterans died in now-historic places: the Battle of the Wilderness, Belleau Wood, Normandy, Iwo Jima, Inchon, Vietnam, Kuwait. Many others fought bravely and, thankfully, returned home to live out happy, accomplished lives among friends, families, and loved ones. Still others remind us that even when America is not at war, the men and women of our military risk and sometimes give their lives for peace.

Three such heroes were interred here just in the past few weeks. They were members of the United States Ship *Cole*, working to preserve peace and stability in a region vital to our interests, their lives taken on October 12th by a brutal act of terrorism. They are: Hull Maintenance Technician Second Class Kenneth Clodfelter, Electronics Technician Chief Petty

Officer Richard Costelow, and Signalman Seaman Cheron Gunn.

Let us say to their families and to all the families who lost their loved ones on the *Cole*, we are grateful for the quiet, heroic service of your loved ones. Now they are in God's care. We mourn their loss, and we shall not rest until those who carried out this cruel act are held to account.

We all saw the TV images of the *Cole* and the massive hole in its side right at the waterline. But what many Americans still don't know about is the heroism that took place after the attack. What we couldn't see was that entire compartments were flooded, hatches blown open, doorways bent, parts of the top deck buckled. So, in addition to finding and bringing home the dead and the wounded, the surviving crew had to save their ship.

They worked around the clock, some in 22-hour shifts, amid smoke, seawater, and twisted steel, with no respite from the desert heat. They used their ingenuity to restore the ship's electrical power so they would no longer have to bail water by hand, bucket by bucket. Some even slept on the deck because the air below was too foul.

In these incredibly difficult circumstances, one helicopter pilot from a ship assisting the *Cole* wrote these words home: "I wish I had the power to relay what I have seen," he said, "but words just won't do it. I do want to tell you the first thing that jumped out at me—the Stars and Stripes flying. Our flag was more beautiful than words can describe. I have never been so proud of what I do or of the men and women I serve with."

Soon the *Cole* will be back home in America for repairs, and soon thereafter, she will be back on the seas, serving America—those Stars and Stripes still flying. We are greatly honored to be joined here today by the commander of the *Cole*—the captain of the *Cole*, Commander Kirk Lippold; his executive officer, Lieutenant Commander Chris Peterschmidt; the Command Master Chief, James Parlier; and some 20 members of their crew. I was honored to welcome them at the White House this morning. I would like

to ask them now to stand and have you welcome them. [Applause]

There are many appropriate ways to honor not just the crew of the *Cole* but all the men and women who have defended liberty in our military service. We honor them first of all, of course, by remembering them and their accomplishments, as we do here. Later today I will go to the groundbreaking of the World War II memorial to honor the service and sacrifice of the greatest generation, those who fought and died to free the world from tyranny, totalitarianism, and hate. And we will pledge there never to stop trying to build the world for which they sacrificed so much.

We also honor our veterans by cherishing with all our hearts the freedoms they paid such a price to defend. If ever there was a doubt about the value of citizenship and each individual's exercise of the freedom of citizenship to vote, this week's election certainly put it to rest. [Laughter] And if ever there was a question about the strength of our democratic institutions in the face of healthy and natural political argument, it has been answered by the measured response of the American people to these extraordinary events.

We have a Constitution. We have a rule of law. We voted, and now the system is trying to figure out exactly what we said. [Laughter] Eventually, they will—the system will do that, according to the Constitution and laws, and America will be just fine.

We honor Vice President Gore and Governor Bush. We honor all those who participated and all those who voted. And I hope they will remind us that the next time the polls are open, without regard to our party, our philosophy, we should show up because we certainly do count.

We honor our veterans as well, in Abraham Lincoln's words, by caring for him who should have borne the battle and for his widow and orphans. Just a few days ago I proudly signed legislation increasing funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs by \$1.5 billion. These additional resources will help our Nation's 24 million veterans, serving more patients, ensuring high quality and timely medical care, improving the delivery of benefit payments for veterans, increasing compensation for disabilities, meeting our national shrine commitment to veteran cemeteries.

We also recently provided a 3.7 across-the-board increase in basic pay for the members

of our Armed Forces; provided military retirees access to prescription drugs with low out-of-pocket costs; and provided lifetime health care coverage that will allow military retirees over 65 to receive affordable, high-quality health care across our Nation.

Finally, we honor our veterans by meeting our part of the solemn compact we have with each and every soldier, sailor, airman, marine, and coastguardsman, regardless of the conflict in which they fought, that we will do all in our power to find them and bring them home if they are captured, missing in action, or fallen on the battlefield.

Today I am proud to announce that we are bringing home another 15 sets of remains, heroes from the Korean war. They are en route right now from Pyongyang to Hawaii for identification, and we praise God for this event.

Tomorrow I will begin a trip to Asia that will end in Vietnam, and I will be the first President to visit that country since 1969. Over the past decade we have moved, step by step, toward normalized relations with Vietnam, based on one central priority: gaining the fullest possible accounting of American prisoners of war and Americans missing in action in Southeast Asia. Continuing cooperation on these issues is on the top of my agenda for this trip, even as we open a new chapter in our relations with Vietnam.

Our Nation has sought to move forward in developing those relations in a way that both honors those who fought and suffered there and does right by the missing and their families. We have done so with the constant involvement and support of Members of Congress who served in Vietnam, America's Vietnam veterans, and their families.

The result has been tremendous progress, and today, full cooperation from the Vietnamese in repatriating remains, accounting for missing Americans, obtaining documents, and conducting over 60 joint field activities with the Vietnamese to search for our MIA's. As a result of that increased cooperation, the remains of 283 Americans have been repatriated since 1993.

On my second day in Vietnam, I will visit a site where Americans and Vietnamese have been searching for the remains of an American serviceman. We believe it to be the place where Air Force Captain Lawrence Evert was downed on November 8, 1967. I am pleased that I will

be joined at the site by two of Captain Evert's sons, Dan and David. We are honored to have them and their sisters, Elizabeth and Tamra, with us here today. We thank them, the members of the Evert family, for their devotion.

When Captain Evert's plane was shot down 33 years ago, an airman on another flight heard a voice on a radio transmission calling out, "I'm hit hard." That hit his loved ones' lives just as hard. Again I say, we thank them for their sacrifice, and we thank them for joining us here today. Where are the Everts? Would you ask them to stand, please? There they are. [*Applause*] Thank you very much. Bless you.

The presence of these two fine men on our trip will help us all to make it clear, in Vietnam, that our work is not yet finished and that progress in our relations depends upon continued cooperation. We will always keep faith with these families and do our duty to the past, for we must never forget.

In our national memory, Vietnam was a war. But Vietnam is also a country—a country emerging from almost 50 years of conflict, upheaval, and isolation, and turning its face to a very different world, a country that can succeed in this new global age only if it becomes more interdependent and open to the world. This is something we should encourage. We should always remember something a great American Vietnam veteran and former POW, Pete Peterson, said when he went to Vietnam as our Ambassador: "We cannot change the past. What we can change is the future."

The future belongs to veterans and their families who deserve all the support and answers a grateful nation can provide. It belongs to the thousands of ordinary Vietnamese citizens who have helped them in this process. It belongs to the Vietnamese-Americans who have come to live among us, including right here in Arlington, and who now can finally travel home to reunite with their families. It belongs to all the good people who have gone to Vietnam to help clear landmines and aid the victims of flooding. It belongs to the next generation of Vietnamese who want to live in a normal, prosperous country, and to be free to shape their destinies and

live their faith. It belongs to all those Americans and Vietnamese who want to build a common future.

On this first Veterans Day of the 21st century, the eighth and last in which I will have the honor to address you and the people of our Nation as President in this sacred place, let us resolve never to stop trying to build that better world for which our veterans have sacrificed. Let us all draw strength from the long legacy of service.

When history looks back upon the records of our age and our Nation centuries from now, I believe it will be written that once there was a great nation of free people who sent their very best young men and women out to serve on the frontiers of freedom in uniform. They went forth to defend their Nation and its ideals, giving up the comforts and conveniences of home. Too many never returned to their families, but none who served ever sacrificed in vain. They led lives of great consequence, for they kept the torch of liberty burning in the oldest democracy on Earth. Each and every one of them were heroes and gave to every child born thereafter a precious and irreplaceable gift. And their Nation remained eternally grateful.

Thank you, and God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:45 a.m. in the Amphitheater at Arlington National Cemetery. In his remarks, he referred to George C. Duggins, national president, Vietnam Veterans of America; Maj. Gen. James T. Jackson, USA, Commanding General, Military District of Washington; John C. (Jack) Metzler, Jr., superintendent, Arlington National Cemetery; Chaplain Jeni Cooke, Director, Chaplain Service, Department of Veterans Affairs; Lee Thornton, master of ceremonies; Republican Presidential candidate Gov. George W. Bush; and Dan Evert, David Evert, Elizabeth Dempsey, and Tamra Brown, children of missing U.S. serviceman Capt. Lawrence Evert. A portion of these remarks could not be verified because the tape was incomplete. The Veterans Day proclamation of November 10 is listed in Appendix D at the end of this volume.